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ABSTRACT

The trend in many classrooms is to move away from using a single textbook in content area classrooms and move toward the use of various works of children's literature integrated with and related to a content-area topic. Instead of using a single discipline approach, teachers should use a multidisciplinary approach in which several subject areas can be integrated using a central theme. Although textbooks provide helpful organization features for reading, their "dry" collection of facts many not motivate students to read. In most cases the teacher designs thematic units which provide opportunities for the students to read extensively in trade books related to the chosen topic. Thematic units can be effectively used at the middle and upper grades because at these levels the content subjects, especially social studies, math, and science have specific concepts to be learned. Thematic units developed by the teacher need to include content area information which will allow students the opportunity for an in-depth learning of specific information. Teachers can develop the units themselves, or the teachers can brainstorm (perhaps using a webbing technique) with students on how skills can be mastered. Interdisciplinary units (which are even more time consuming than a thematic unit) may be organized by using a block plan. Experiences in using thematic units has led to the conclusion that these units offer students the motivation and interest in learning content subjects. (Contains 25 references, a web outline, and a block plan for a unit on weather.) (RS)

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Using Thematic Units to Teach Content Reading Subjects

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The trend in many classrooms is to move away from using a single textbook in the content area classes and move toward the use of various books of Children's Literature integrated with and related to a content-area topic (Russell, 1993). This study is similar to that of L. Smith and H. Johnson, "Models for Implementing Literature in Content Studies," The Reading Teacher, November, 1994. In the Smith and Johnson study, they explain how to use children's literature to teach content area subjects.

> "Students spend a part of each day studying content that may seem unrelated and unconnected to the stories of their lives. If we want students to connect with the story of life, we might begin by integrating children's literature into content studies. Literature can become the lens through which content is viewed." (p. 198)

The authors of this proposal agree with the authors Smith and Johnson, however, these authors maintain that instead of using a single discipline approach, that teachers use a multidisciplinary approach in which several subject areas can be integrated using a central theme. These subject areas can be organized to develop a thematic unit.

Traditionally, the adopted textbook has been the primary source of teaching information, especially in social studies and science classes. Although textbooks provide helpful organizational features for reading about a specific content subject, their distilled and serious discussion of content area information does not appeal to the student to read the texts (Brozo & Simpson, 1991). Textbooks are designed to cover a body of knowledge whose parameters are defined by the curricula (Sebesta, 1989).

Units of concepts related to topics to be taught serve to

stimulate and prepare students to read textbook topics. These units contain activities which contribute to the student's readiness to read and learn the mandated concepts and skills (Atwell, 1990). The emerging practice is to develop a thematic unit which inter-relates children's trade books. The main source of deriving information is to use these thematic units instead of the traditional textbook approach. The basic information is usually the same in the trade books as in the textbook. The thematic units allow students to learn that a library book can be used to discover information as well as to be read for enjoyment. According to Smith and Johnson (1994) Childrens' Literature can bring content area studies to life. This article presents evidence to show how content area studies can be taught by using the thematic unit approach.

Using the thematic unit approach allows the students the opportunity to not only to learn new material but also at the same time to expand their background information of prior knowledge. Through the thematic unit the students can discover the diversity of books related to the specific topic rather than learning from a single textbook in the content area.

Although textbooks provide helpful organization features for reading, their dry collection of facts may not motivate students to read (Brozo & Simpson, 1991). Content area textbook reading also possess many problems for students because they are unfamiliar with how the text is structured. However, these same students understand the structure of a story. Thus the thematic content unit becomes the focus of learning (Englert & Hiebert, 1984). Integrating literature with content subjects sets the stage for

students to focus on those skills needed in the content area subject (Beane, 1991).

According to Smith & Johnson (1994).... "An integrated unit breaks through academic labels and examines a theme beyond the traditional segmented approach. No longer is Math found only in math class; instead math concepts are used to study part of the theme or topic. This principal applies to all subjects. The theme becomes the contral focus of the study and the means through which the study evolves" (p.200).

The theme or topic is selected by the teacher who is guided by the school district's course of study. In most cases the teacher designs the thematic units which provide opportunities for the students to read extensively in trade books related to the chosen topic.

In doing so, the students learn new ways to expand and deepen their reading experiences and their responses to literary texts. Using children's trade books to teach content subjects enables the students to make connections between diverse literary texts and to respond to literary texts in the social community of the classroom. Lehr (1991) found that students with more exposure to children's literature were able to discuss themes for books at more abstract and generalized levels of meaning. Through the content of the literature incorporated into the curriculum, children gain new insights, learn new information, deal with universal issues and extend their present knowledge (Wood, 1994).

> "A content approach which includes thematic units exposes the students to a variety of authors, topics and genres and offers students an in-depth opportunity for literacy study" (Moss, 1994, p.3).

These units offer a response to the students' interests and allow teachers to realize the accomplishment of their teaching goals and objectives. Thematic units can be effectively used at the middle and upper grades because at these levels the content subjects especially social studies, math, and science have specific concepts to be learned. An advantage of using thematic units is that they can be adapted to meet the individual needs of the students and can transcend grade levels. According to Yellin and Black (1994), thematic units provide a method of grouping activities to integrate language learning with all of the subject areas of the curriculum. In fact, Goodman, Smith, Meredith, and Gandman (1987) have maintained that integration of the content subjects is facilitated by thematic units and these units should be centered around the subject areas of science, social studies and literature.

Capitalizing on students' interests in learning specific factual information is critical to education, especially when teaching subjects such as social studies and science (Smith, 1994). Simply giving students assigned pages to read in a teaching textbook does little to stimulate learning in these content subjects. Most students need to be directed how to make the connection between the content materials and their personal experiential background (Moss, 1994). Literary experiences are not created by the text alone, they are the result of the readers' interaction with the text (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Children's literature books do influence students in the very best way because they compel students to think beyond the textbook and address the varied topics presented (Sebesta, 1989). It

broadens the learning experiences far beyond what students could have hoped to get from a single basal text. Students can vicariously experience places and events which they could never visit in real life.

Every classroom should have numerous books, both fiction and non-fiction. Teachers should allow students time to read these books with other students, or tell a fellow-classmate about the book. It is through this sharing of books that students look forward to this relaxed reading period. Teachers can develop many creative book reviews rather than using the traditional written book report. Today's children are turned-off to reading when they must write the traditional book report. Russell (1993) suggests that "Books should be seen as an inseparable part of education, and therefore an invaluable part of life."

Joy Moss (1994) states that teachers who read literature and view it as important are better prepared to bring literature into other classes they teach. In the process of teaching content area reading they, along with their students, experience literary texts and engage the students in inquiry and discovery, especially in the content area subjects. Using thematic units to teach the content subjects provides opportunities for cumulative learning and the discovery of the connections between content-related subjects and diverse literary texts.

Thematic units developed by the teacher need to include content area information which will allow students the opportunity for an in-depth learning of specific information. Included in these thematic units is time for the students to extensively read the books necessary to build a background of prior knowledge in the

specific content subject. It is the purpose of this journal entry to examine the effectiveness of using the thematic unit approach to teach content area reading. Many researchers already cited in this paper explain the thematic unit and how it can be used to teach content subjects. However, few researchers have cited specific research studies that have been conducted regarding effectiveness of this approach by using quantifiable data. It would be of value to educators to evaluate the students' achievement levels in content subject when the thematic unit approach to content area reading was used.

Yellin and Blake (1994) state that central to the idea of unit teaching is planning the unit. Because the theme is the core of the unit and provides a structure for organized activities, it is important for the teacher to spend some time thinking about which themes would be most appropriate for creating a thematic unit.

Thematic units can be developed in several ways. The first way the teacher selects the course objectives to be mastered by the students and begins searching for library resources and trade-books to use to teach these materials. The teacher develops an overall purpose for the unit and then relates the materials to a given subject to be used on a specific day. The organization of a thematic unit which integrates several texts and skills requires time to develop. However, the advantages and the long-term outcomes are well worth the time spent to develop a thematic unit. When developing these thematic units it is techers need to remember that the content serves as the vehicle for developing skills, and is essential for learning. Units can range from 2-4 weeks, however, teachers can plan thematic units of varying length.

A second method of developing a thematic unit is for the teacher to select the curriculum skills to be mastered concerning a given topic and the "brainstorms" with the class as to how these skills can be mastered and how specific subjects might be integrated. The teacher directs the discussion to cover the necessary skills. When this selection is completed the students are allowed to select trade books which they feel would be helpful in learning this unit. The teacher may approve these trade books or suggest replacements, when necessary. During this discussion it is helpful if the teacher uses the webbing technique so the students can visualize the inter relationships among the concepts.

The webbing technique is means of generating ideas and linking them to a central focus. Webbing can center on concepts, topics, or themes or books (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987). Webbing is especially helpful to establish the background knowledge of the students. It demonstrates an overall interrelationship of topics. An example of a web is which uses "WEATHER" as the topic, is illustrated below.

[INSERT CHART 1 HERE]

An alternative method of using the thematic unit approach is for the teacher to develop a series of questions. These questions reflect the specific goals and objectives for the unit. The students are then allowed to select a trade book related to the context topic being studied. Although some of the answers to the questions may vary, the teacher discusses these differences with the students.

> According to Morrow, Smith & Wilkinson (1994) "When developing a thematic unit the reacher needs to select titles of books which the students will find interesting and relevant. The choice of books can be teacher-selected or student-selected. When teachers allow students to share content-area reading through books that interest them, the students develop a positive learning situation. Thus the students become motivated to learn." (p. 63).

Teacher initiated questions are also used to stimulate higher-level thinking skills as well as written and oral responses to the literature stories. The teacher guides the discussion and the answers found to specific questions which emphasize the pre-planned objectives. The ultimate goal of the teacher-initiated content questions is to enable students to form their own questions in response to an information book in childrens literature. To do this effectively, the teacher needs to model these skills for the students.

This thematic approach supports the study of Harste, Short, & Burke (1988) which finds that learning and understanding are processes of making connections. Students are able to understand what they read only because they are able to make the connections between what they read in current trade books and their past background experiences. This association enables the students to broaden their background information and learn in-depth knowledge of content area subjects.

The use of the thematic units is not limited to a single content area subject but can be extended across the curriculum. When the thematic unit is extended across the curriculum, it is sometimes labeled interdisciplinary unit. This is a most effective method of teaching. This method of teaching is reflected in Huck,

Hepler, Hickman's (1993) study which states that literature is about life and through its organization literature has the power to shape and give coherence to human experiences. Probst (1992) maintains that these discussions are designed to reinforce the belief that meaning is generated by the reader transacting with a book and may lead students to understand the text, and the realted concepts more clearly.

Organizing interdisciplinary units is even more time consuming than a thematic unit, but again it is time well spent. Integration of information across the curriculum provides connections among content area subjects, helping students to bridge the gaps in their learning. For example, teaching about the Revolutionary War in Social Studies is the ideal time to use historical fiction about this time period. It is also the ideal time to study about Science and health related to that time period.

Interidsciplinary units may be organized by using a block plan such as this sample that illustrates weather as a theme across the curriculum.

[INSERT CHART 2 HERE]

Judith Langer (1992) states that:

> "Readers contemplate feelings, intentions and implications, using their knowledge of human possibility to go beyond the meanings imparted in the text and fill out their understanding. In this way, readers possibilities on two levels: in terms of their momentary understandings, and in terms of their changing sense of the unfolding whole." (p. 5).

In summary, Lucy Calkins (1994) gives four criteria for effective thematic study as related to content area reading:

1) Thematic studies should encourage depth, thoughtfulness and focused inquiry. The included disciplines must be thoughtfully planned and connected, not a hodgepodge of vaguely related ides.

2) In thematic units students are lead to make inquiry-like questions. In these studies the students ask questions from the point of view of a participant in that field study. For example if the class was studying city traffic patterns, the students would act as they were city planners.

3) Thematic units should provide purposeful learning. In using thematic information is learned for applicable purposes. The teacher needs to determine these purposes when developing the unit.

4) A good thematic study does not contradict one's beliefs about teaching reading. The use of a thematic study encourages and incorporates the necessary reading and writing skills.

Experiences in using thematic units has lead to the conclusion that these units offer students the motivation and interest in learning content subjects. Literature stories provide meaningful experiences and enables students to gain insight into their everyday lives.

The one important concept that teachers must remember is that children need to discover their own interests and questions to be

answered. Teachers need to involve students in planning thematic units and thus the students accept the responsibility and purpose for learning the unit materials and concepts. Students need opportunities to discover that the reading process is applicable to content area subjects as well as is used in the so-called "reading class." Learning to read is a process that continues throughout one's life. This author agrees with Moss (1994) who concludes that:

> "...(teachers need) to bring literature into the lives of their students and help them developlife-long habits of reading, writing, thinking and talking about literature." This the ultimate goal of any literature program..." (p.12).

CHART 1

WEB OUTLINE

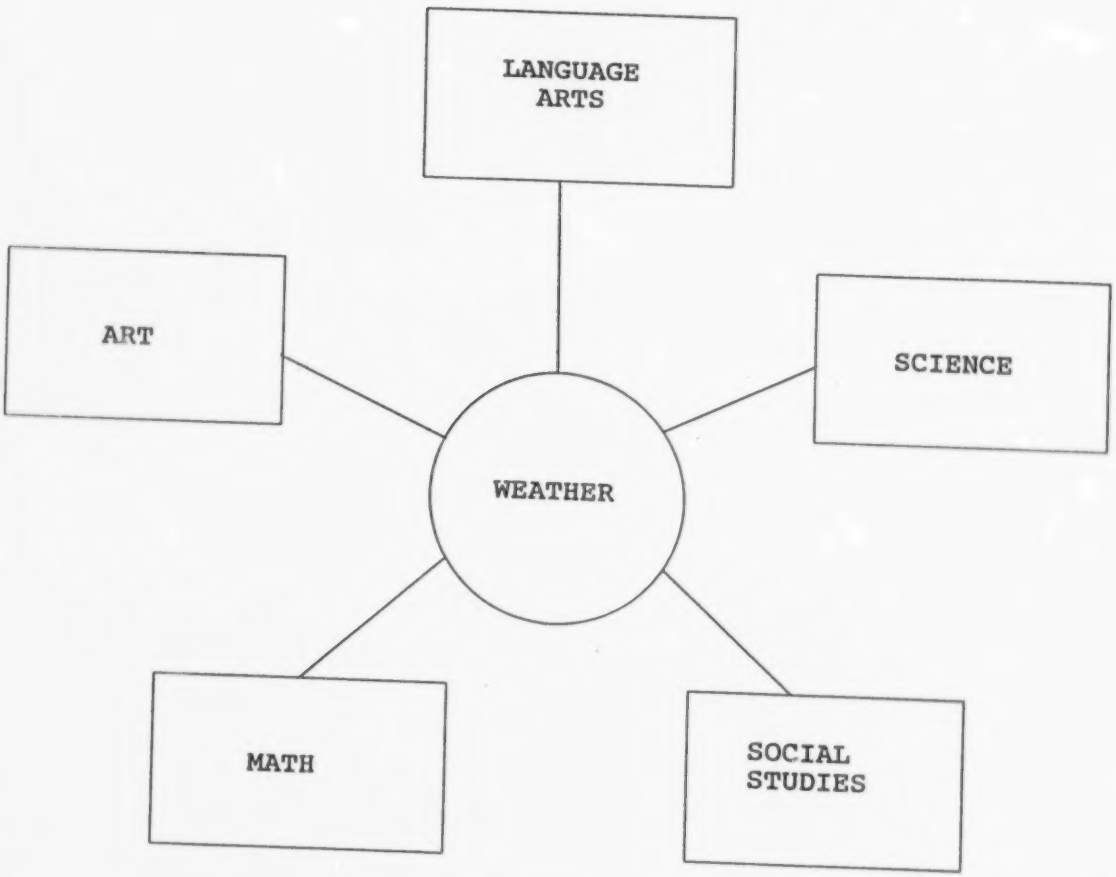

CHART 2

WEATHER

	LANGUAGE ARTS	SCIENCE	SOCIAL STUDIES	MATH	ART
MONDAY	Class discussion related to weather. Teacher gives facts about weather.	Discuss how weather affects our lives. Science Book "Storms"	Locate states and discuss different weather depending on locations.	Begin a chart of daily temperatures (gather from TV weather reports.	
TUESDAY	Have students write about on event where the weather affected what they did.	"Rainbows Formed" use this topic in contrast to "Storms"	Use pages and skills from textbook about weather.	Begin a chart of weather and teach changing fehrenheit to celsius temperatures.	
WEDNESDAY	Discuss vocabulary words in Science text using context clues.	Use science text for information about different kinds of clouds.	Use a wall map to discuss weather currents and patterns. Include points about weather that need to be mastered.	Compute the probability of kinds of weather occurring at various locations (teach probability).	Have students draw different kinds of clouds and label them.
THURSDAY	Present trade books related to topics previously discussed.	Discuss affects that clouds and sum have on ocean tides.	Designate certain cities to find more related weather information.	Teach graphing. Have students graph temperatures collected in previous lessons.	Share drawings of clouds.
FRIDAY	Vocabulary. Reinforce necessary information to know regarding weather.	Evaluation. Give quiz about science topics covered.	Share new information and trade books related to weather.		Have meteorologist visit the class.

WEEK TWO OBJECTIVES: By using knowledge from week one, students will understand the importance of weather, how necessary to predict future weather, and the formation and danger of approaching storms. Discussing the formation of rainbows will provide a lighter note to the thematic unit.

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